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ABSTRACT

The concept of school culture offers principals and other leaders a broader framework for understanding problems and relationships within the school. School culture can be defined as the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, and myths understood by members of the school community. Researchers have found that healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction. A vision for creating a healthy school culture should be a collaborative activity among teachers, students, parents, staff, and the principal. The principal's role in changing school culture is to act with care and concern for others, work to develop shared visions of what the school should be, and work on team-building. (Contains 12 references.) (MLF)

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Leadership for School Culture

by Stephen Stolp

Successful leaders have learned to view their organizations' environment in a holistic way. This wide-angle view is what the concept of school culture offers principals and other leaders. It gives them a broader framework for understanding difficult problems and complex relationships within the school. By deepening their understanding of school culture, these leaders will be better equipped to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment.

What Is School Culture?

The field of education lacks a clear and consistent definition of *school culture*. The term has been used synonymously with a variety of concepts, including "climate," "ethos," and "saga" (Deal 1993). The concept of culture came to education from the corporate workplace with the notion that it would provide direction for a more efficient and stable learning environment.

Scholars have argued about the meaning of *culture* for centuries. Noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has made a large contribution to our current understanding of the term. For Geertz, culture represents a "historically transmitted pattern of meaning." Those patterns of meaning are expressed both (explicitly) through symbols and (implicitly) in our taken-for-granted beliefs.

A review of the literature on school culture reveals much of Geertz's perspective. Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson (1990) note that the definition of culture includes "deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of [the school's] history." Paul E. Heckman (1993) reminds us that school culture lies in "the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students, and principals." These definitions go beyond the business of creating an efficient learning environment. They focus more on the core values necessary to teach and influence young minds.

Thus, *school culture* can be defined as the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community (Stolp and Smith 1994). This system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act.

Why Is School Culture Important?

Researchers have compiled some impressive evidence on school culture. Healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction.

Consider several recent studies. Leslie J. Fyans, Jr. and Martin L. Maehr (1990) looked at the effects of five dimensions of school culture: academic challenges, comparative achievement, recognition for achievement, school community, and perception of school goals. In a survey of 16,310 fourth-, sixth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade students from 820 public schools in Illinois, they found support for the proposition that students are more motivated to learn in schools with strong cultures.

In a project directed at improving elementary student test scores, Jerry L. Thacker and William D. McInerney (1992) looked at the effects of school culture on student achievement. The project they studied focused on creating a new mission statement, goals based on outcomes for students, curriculum alignment corresponding with those goals, staff development, and building level decision-making. The results were significant. The number of students who failed an annual statewide test dropped by as much as 10 percent.

These results are consistent with other findings that suggest the implementation of a clear mission statement, shared vision, and schoolwide goals promote increased student achievement.

School culture also correlates with teachers' attitudes toward their work. In a study that profiled effective and ineffective organizational cultures, Yin Cheong Cheng (1993) found stronger school cultures had better motivated teachers. In an environment with strong organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership, and intimacy, teachers experienced higher job satisfaction and increased productivity.

How Is It Best To Change a School's Culture?

Leaders who are interested in

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changing their school's culture should first try to understand the existing culture. Cultural change by definition alters a wide variety of relationships. These relationships are at the very core of institutional stability. Reforms should be approached with dialogue, concern for others, and some hesitation.

One strategy was outlined by Willis J. Furtwengler and Anita Micich (1991). At a retreat, students, teachers, and administrators from five schools were encouraged to draw visible representations of how they felt about their school culture. The idea was to "make thought visible" and highlight positive and negative aspects of their respective school cultures. Teachers, parents, and administrators were able to identify several areas that would benefit from change.

Likewise, school artifacts such as the routines, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, myths, or subtle difference in school language can provide clues for how to approach cultural change. School artifacts change over time. A principal may decide to shorten time between classes only later to find out that this time was important for teacher interaction and unity. Paying attention to such routines, before changing them, may provide valuable insights into how school cultures function.

A formal and well-tested instrument for approaching cultural change is NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments—Information System Management (CASE—IMS). This instrument focuses on leadership styles, organizational structure, beliefs and values, classroom satisfaction, and productivity. CASE—IMS offers a diagnostic assessment that focuses on the entire school environment (Keefe 1993).

What Is the Relationship Between Vision and Cultural Change?

A coherent vision specifies the particular values and beliefs that will guide policy and practice within the school. Ideally, the school board and superintendent set a broad vision for all schools in the district, and, within that context, the principal coordinates the process of arriving at a particular vision for each school. The creation of a vision is not a static event, because the vision must change as culture changes. As Peter Senge (1990) notes, "At any one point there will be a particular image of the future that is predominant, but that image will evolve." The principal who is able to adapt a vision to new challenges will be more successful in building strong school cultures.

A vision for creating a healthy school culture should be a collaborative activity among teachers, students, parents, staff, and the principal. Michael G. Fullan (1992) writes, "Whose vision is it?" "Principals," he says, "are blinded by their own vision when they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it." A more useful approach is to create a shared vision that allows for collaborative school cultures.

What Is the Principal's Role?

The most effective change in school culture happens when principals, teachers, and students model the values and beliefs important to the institution. The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as "what is important." A principal who acts with care and concern for others is more likely to develop a school culture with similar values. Likewise, the principal who has little time for others places an implicit stamp of approval on selfish behaviors and attitudes.

Besides modelling, Deal and Peterson suggest that principals should work to develop shared visions—rooted in history, values, beliefs—of what the school should be, hire compatible staff, face conflict rather than avoid it, and use storytelling to illustrate shared values.

More practical advice comes from Jane Arkes, a principal interviewed by Stolp and Smith: work on team-building; put your agenda second; know that you don't have all the answers—everyone has limitations; learn from students and staff; put people before paper.

Finally and most important, principals must nurture the traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that already express and reinforce positive school culture.

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